

A Guilty Conscience

J. J. BELL.

AN' HOO are ye gettin' on at the schule, ma mannie?" enquired Mr. Purdie of his grandson who, after several invitations, had condescended to sit on the old man's knee.

"Fine," replied Macgregor carelessly. "Wis ye dux the day?"

An answer to this question came from the boy's mother who was washing up the tea things.

"Dux!" exclaimed Mrs. Robinson. "Macgregor dux! He's never been dux excep' at the wrang end, an' he'll never be dux till he peys mair attention to his lessons."

"Aw, Lizzie," put in John from his seat at the fire-side, opposite his father-in-law. "Ye're unco severe. The wean's fine. It's no' aye the laddie that's dux that maks the cleverest man. I'm shair I wis never dux when I wis at the schule."

"An' wha wis tellin' you ye wis a clever man?" Lizzie retorted quickly.

"Deed, ye had me there!" John admitted good-humoredly. "But ye maun mind it's Macgregor's first year at the schule, an'—"

"Ay, ay," Mr. Purdie mildly interposed. "It's Macgregor's first year at the schule. Me maun mind that."

"It's no' his first year at gettin' spiled. Ye're near as bad as John, fayther!" said Lizzie, as she polished one of her best plates.

Mr. Purdie chuckled and turned once more to his grandson.

"But ye wud like fine to be dux, Macgregor," he said kindly.

"Och, I'm no' heedin'," returned the boy, putting one of his grandfather's peppermints into his mouth. "Macgregor!" his mother exclaimed in a tone of warning.

"Whit's the use o' bein' dux?" said the boy. "Ye get naethin' fur it but a daft-like medal—an' it's no' real silver, an' ye dinna get keepin' it."

"Nod, that's truth!" murmured John.

"Haud yer tongue, John!" said his wife. "The medal wis a notion of the young laddie that teachid the infant classes, an'—"

"I'm no' in the infants," cried Macgregor indignantly. "I'm in the clementry."

"Weel, weel," his mother returned soothingly. "I meant to say the clementry, but—"

"Jist that, jist that," put in Mr. Purdie. "An' I'm thinkin' the medal's no' a bad notion either. Noo, Macgregor," he continued impressively, "wud ye no' like to get the medal to please yer Maw? Eh?"

Macgregor looked at his boots and nodded his head, rather sheepishly.

"That's richt, ma mannie! An' to please yer Paw? Eh?"

"Mphm," admitted Macgregor under his breath. "An' me?"

"Ay," said the boy more boldly.

Mr. Purdie looked from one parent to the other with a smile of something like triumph. Lizzie nodded soberly; John grinned broadly.

"Noo, ma mannie," Mr. Purdie resumed, "bring hame the medal, an'—an' I'll gi'e ye saxpence!"

"Oh, fayther!" said Mrs. Robinson protestingly. "Dye hear that, Macgregor?" cried her husband gleefully. "There's yer chance!"

"Macgregor! Whit dae ye say to yer Grandpaw fur his kindness?" Mrs. Robinson enquired, a trifle sharply.

"Thank ye, Grandpaw," said Macgregor. He was looking unusually thoughtful. "If I get the saxpence, wull I need to pit it in the bank?" he asked presently.

"Deed ay!" promptly replied his mother.

"Then I'm no' heedin' about it," he returned shortly. "Na, na," said Mr. Purdie, winking at his daughter, "ye'll get daein' anything ye like wi' the saxpence."

Lizzie compressed her lips and shook out her towel with unnecessary violence. John was discreet for once, and hid his satisfaction behind his evening paper.

Mr. Purdie stroked the back of the boy's head. "Weel, ma mannie, ye'll ha'e a try at the medal ony-wey. Eh?"

"But ye'll no' be here efter the morn's nicht, Grandpaw," said Macgregor.

A lesson which he was supposed to have learned a week previously.

The winner of the medal for the next day was Johnny Knox, who was quite accustomed to the honor: it was his three days, at least, out of every five. But it was not once a week that he enjoyed the honor of being addressed by Macgregor, who had once championed his cause in a fight with a bully.

"Here, Johnny, I want to speak to ye," said Macgregor, when school was over.

Johnny's small pale face beamed.

"It's a secret," added Macgregor, drawing him away from the stream of youngsters.

Macgregor took Johnny's arm and conducted him into a convenient close.

Then in a whisper, he put the question: "Wull ye len' us the medal till the morn's mornin'?"

"Len' ye the medal?" gasped the astonished Johnny. "Whit d'ye want the medal fur?"

"Fun," was the brief reply. "I'll gi'e ye it back the morn's mornin', Johnny."

Johnny looked exceedingly dubious.

"Come on!" said his friend persuasively. "Len' us the medal, Johnny."

Johnny shook his head.

"I—I'll gi'e ye a ha'pny, if ye len' us the medal," said Macgregor after some consideration.

"But whit are ye wantin' it fur?"

Johnny looked at the medal in his hand.

"I'll gi'e ye a penny!" Johnny stared. "Whaur's the penny?" he suddenly enquired.

"Ye'll get it the morn's mornin'!"

"Fine ham!" said Johnny in a tone that made Macgregor clench his fist.

"As shair's death!" he said, restraining himself from grabbing the battered disk pinned to the other boy's coat.

But Johnny was not satisfied.

"Ye micht lose the medal," he said slowly, "an' then—"

Macgregor drew his forefinger across his throat, as he said solemnly: "Ye'll get the medal, an' the penny furbye, the morn's mornin'!"

He repeated the mystic sign, and Johnny wavered. His fingers went to the medal and fumbled at the fastening.

"I'll tak' it aff fur ye," said Macgregor kindly, and a moment later the medal was in his hand.

Johnny looked fearful, but his power of speech seemed to be paralyzed. He followed Macgregor from the close, walked with him as far as their ways lay

cheerfully enough; "Just that! Ye'll be wanting to play efter yer day's work. But ye'll be wanting me to hear yer lessons later on, Eh?"

"It's Friday, so I dinna need to learn ony lessons the night," Macgregor explained, and departed.

In the street he met his chum Willie Thomson. He had intended to ask Willie to join him in melting the sump, but somehow he didn't. He felt the medal under his jacket, and wished he had removed it before coming out. He was glad to get rid of Willie, and when the latter had gone, he hung about in the shade of a neighboring close until it was time to go home for his tea.

Mr. Purdie, unable to contain himself, had broken the great news to Lizzie and John in turn, and Macgregor was received, literally, with open arms. John, of course, was much more demonstrative than his wife; still, it could hardly be said that she took the matter coolly.

"Ye're to get a fried egg to yer tea, dearie," she informed her son, after suggesting that he should wash his face and hands.

"Thank ye, Maw," mumbled the boy from the midst

of the towel. To eat an egg by jowl with his grandfather was usually a treat indeed—it gave Macgregor such a manly feeling!—but on this occasion the promise failed to arouse rapture.

"He's rale modest," whispered Mr. Purdie a little later, when the boy was standing gazing out of the window.

Macgregor received numerous pats on the head and compliments from his grandfather and father, but he accepted them stolidly.

It was the fried egg that finished him.

"Is yer egg no' nice, dearie?" asked Lizzie at last, after several anxious glances at his plate. Mr. Purdie and John had finished their eggs, and Macgregor was not usually behind them.

"Ay, Maw," he replied huskily, and endeavored to eat.

"Whit's wrang, Macgregor?" John enquired, deeply concerned.

Macgregor gulped something which was not egg, and a tear rolled down his cheek.

"Puir mannie!" said Mr. Purdie gently, and put out a kindly hand to stroke his grandson's head.

Knife and fork fell from the youngster's hands, and he hid his face.

"Are ye feelin' no' weel, dearie?" asked his mother, rising and coming to his chair.

"Ay," came the muffled reply.

"Ye best come an' lie down," she said after a moment. "Come to yer bed, dearie."

Macgregor rose at once and followed her to the other room. He lay down on the bed and hid his face.



"YE SEE WHAT YE CAN DAE WHEN YE TRY, MA MANNIE!" SAID MR. PURDIE

Lizzie laid a hand on his brow. It was rather hot. She did not trouble him with questions.

"It's a peety ye didna pit yer saxpence in the bank," she said, sadly. "I'll awa' an' get the ile."

Macgregor said nothing, either then or when he took the dose a few minutes later. His mother spread a big shawl over him and left him. It was the customary treatment in the circumstances.

About an hour later John who, along with Mr. Purdie, had been sitting in almost silent misery, received permission from Lizzie to visit the patient.

"Weel, ma wee man," he said softly as he bent over the bed, "are ye feelin' ony easier?"

Silence; then a sob.

"Ha'e ye a pain, Macgregor?" A murmur, which might have been one of assent.

"Whaur's the pain, ma laddie?" No answer. "Is't there?"

"Naw; it—it's furdur up," Macgregor managed to say.

"There?"

"Furdur up." Macgregor put his hand to his throat.

John was alarmed, and went at once to inform Lizzie. She looked anxious.

"I'll gang ben an' see him, John. Stay you wi' fayther."

"Dye no' think we sud go an' get the doctor, wife?" "I'll see, John. Dinna vex yersel'. It's maybe no' that serious."

She went to her son.

"Is yer throat bad, dearie?" she asked him, sitting down beside him.

"It's no' bad, but—but it's hurtin' me."

"It maun be bad, if it's hurtin' ye, dearie. Is yer feet warm?" She began to unlace his boots.

"Ay."

"Is yer heid sair?"

"Naw."

She drew off his boots. "Yer feet's cosy enough," she said, feeling them. "Wait till I licht the gas."

But Macgregor caught her hand. "Dinna licht the gas, Maw," he cried chokingly.

"But I want to see your tongue an' yer throat, dearie."

He held her tighter and shivered.

"Ma wee man," she cried, softly, in her fear, "whit is't? Is yer throat unco sair?"

He tried to speak. "It's jist—it's jist—"

"Tell me, dearie."

"It's jist sair wi'—wi' sorriness," he whispered, dropping his hand and burying his face in his arms.

Came then the miserable confession, or rather the broken answers to the mother's painful questions.

"I never thoct a laddie o' mines wud play sic a dirty trick," said Lizzie sadly, looking down on the culprit. "I wud faur rather see ye at the fit o' the class—"

"I wis at the fit the day, Maw."

Lizzie ignored the appeal. "Whit gar'd ye dae it?" she suddenly demanded. "Wis is the saxpence?"

"Ay."

"But ye didna spend ony o' the saxpence when ye had the chance. Hoo wis that? Wis ye fear?"

"Naw."

Lizzie's face softened a thought. "Wis ye sorry?"

"Ay, Maw."

There was a short silence. Then Lizzie said quietly: "I'm no' gaun to say ony mair about it, Macgregor. I'm gled ye wis sorry in time, but bein' sorry dinna mak' up fur daein' wrang. Mind that! See hoo sorry ye've made us a'! Noo I'll ha'e to tell yer Paw an' yer Granpaw, an' gi'e him back his saxpence."

Macgregor groaned with shame.

"Ay; I maun tell them, dearie!"—the tender word escaped her ere she knew—"I maun tell them, fur ye deceived them, an'—an' ye wudna like to keep on deceivin' them—wud ye?" She stooped for his answer.

"I kent ye wudna, Macgregor."

She moved to the door, but a sound from the bed recalled her. She bent over the boy for a moment.

From the door she said: "No ye best tak' aff yer claes, an' gang to bed proper." She closed the door.

It was a heavy blow to John. He said nothing at all. Old Mr. Purdie was greatly distressed. He blamed himself bitterly. "I had nae business to bribe the puir laddie. If it hadna been fur me he wud never ha'e thoct o' daein' the thing. An' him learnin' the wrang lesson, puir lamb! An' noo he's lyin' in there wi' a sair conscience, efter no' bein' able to tak' his nice egg, an' efter gettin' nesty medicine—deed! Lizzie, I'm ashamed o' mase! I am that! Fur Macgregor's no' a bad wean—"

"I never said he wis!" said Lizzie sharply. "When he does wrang, he's sorry. There's mony a laddie wud ha'e spent the saxpence an' never thoct shame."

It was a very grateful glance that John gave his wife. She affected not to see it, but a few minutes later she said carelessly:

"John, ye micht gang an' see if Macgregor's sleepin'."

Apparently it took John about an hour to find out. When he returned to the kitchen his face wore a sobered but not an unhappy expression. Neither he nor his son had exchanged a word, but the big hand had said something to the small one, and the small one had replied.

"He's maybe no' jist sleepin' yet," said John, as he lit his pipe for the first smoke of the evening. "Wud ye gang ben an' see him?" he asked Mr. Purdie.

"No' yet, John; I'll gang in a wee while," replied the old man, who was still nursing the feeling of guilt.

But ere long he rose and toddled from the kitchen. Opening the other door, he peeped in. Macgregor's back was to him. Macgregor's garments lay on a chair on the near side of the bed. Mr. Purdie stepped stealthily forward, stealthily slipped the saxpence into a trouser pocket, and stole quietly from the room.

"Is he sleepin'?" asked Lizzie.

"I couldna say fur certain," returned her father, still trembling with excitement.

Lizzie went to see for herself.

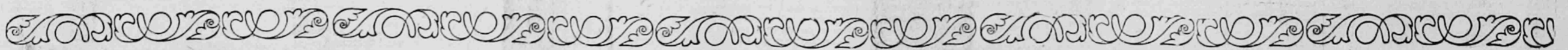
"Are ye sleepin', Macgregor?" she whispered from the doorway.

"Not yet, Maw."

"Are ye hungry?"

"Awfu'!"

It is perhaps worthy of record that on the following Monday afternoon, Macgregor brought home the medal—honorably gained; but it is only honest to add that he never did so again.



NEXT WEEK: A Cure for "Nerves"

By Francis Lynde